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ABSTRACT

The technique of Soundscripting, the addition of sound cues and sound effects to the canonical pages of any play, is flexible enough to be done at no cost or with all the advantages of modern media. In class, the use of Shakespearean radio dramas or comedies can be effective. The long-term process in class involves four major steps and may take from a few days to a few weeks in and out of class. The steps are: (1) students in collaborative groups read their scenes out loud; (2) they designate and devise the sound effects that fit the text; (3) they render the sound effects alone with a question and answer period by an audience; and (4) they perform the text and sound effects. Key scenes in Shakespeare's "Hamlet" work well for this technique. Some warnings in selecting scenes are: some scenes are too well known and the audience may have a clear inflexible idea of what should be happening; the choices must be judicious because most classes will not have the people or the time to take on many scenes; and teams of students usually need a few roles to play, not a single one. Soundscripting could easily work with any text from any generation as a way to create a fuller effect of interpretation of a script within a classroom. (RS)

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The Radio Play's the Thing: Teaching Text and Performance Through Soundscripting

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By Soundscripting, we will mean the addition of sound cues and sound effects to the canonical pages of any play, through here specifically Shakespeare's, which many of our introductory students find too dry for interest and our advanced students discover are too colorful and textured for simple reading. It follows much along the lines of a Foley Artist in film or television who adds or "sweetens" the sounds within a scene.

In class, I have used CDs of the BBC Radio's Hamlet (1992) and Romeo and Juliet (1993) staring Kenneth Branagh, Emma Thompson, John Gielgud, Judi Dench, and Derek Jacobi to help in re-establishing the possibilities of a form that is largely forgotten in the United States. With a few exceptions, the radio drama or comedy has disappeared on our airwaves. The Renaissance Theatre Company's productions were directed by Branagh and Glyn Dearman.

The CDs provide a wide variety of examples of what the sound effects performance can add to the total production and interpretation. The complexity of setting brought out in the long balcony scene in Romeo & Juliet, with details like the sound of running water from a fountain, and the power of leaving space for each listener's imagination with what is not made concrete about, for example, the appearance of King Hamlet throughout that play.

The long-term process in class involves four major steps, including three performances. These will take a few days to maybe a few weeks of time

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in and out of class. First, the students, in collaborative groups, will read their scenes out loud, something like a sight reading, in class.

Then, they Soundscript the text by designating and devising the sound effects that fit what is in, or indicated by, the text. Third is their second performance is the rendering of the sound effects alone with a question and answer period by the audience and the performers as to what the sounds evoked and what they were supposed to create.

The final project is a combined performance of text and effects, along with the new element of any "soundtrack" music which may come from any existing recording, may be played live, and/or be composed for the class performance.

As an example of what can be done with a single play, here are key scenes in Hamlet which work well for this technique. Here is a sample list with one or two of the main issues for Soundscripters.

1.5 Keys are to establish the haunted mood and the nature of the Ghost talking to Hamlet.

3.2 Performing the Performance of the Players by adding sound to the play within play which also explains how the royal court responds.

3.4 The fast action by many characters and the parts of what would the stage set leading up to Polonius's death.

5.1 The rhythms of the humor by the Grave Diggers and the clues about death.

5.2 The furious action of the duels, all the deaths, and Fortinbras with his army.

As may be already been observed, some of the more famous scenes, including the soliloquy, have not been listed. This procedure will work on

any scene but it seems there should be three warnings before selecting the cuttings.

First, some scenes may already be too well known to be the ones best used to demonstrate the technique. Many people, especially those relatively new to Shakespeare, who have seen a movie or play version will already have a clear, often inflexible idea of what is to be occurring.

Second, the choices must be judicious because most classes will not have the people or the time to take on many scenes. Depending on the class size, the instructor may have to limit the number of teams to three or four per play.

Third, teams of students usually need a few roles to play, not a single one. The more voices or sound artists involved, often the better - as long as they share a common focus. The priority seems to be for choosing either the most pivotal/climactic and/or the most opaque scenes for their rich possibilities and to foster the students' overall interpreting skills..

This technique was demonstrated in a Workshop session at the NCTE's First International Conference on Teaching Shakespeare Through Performance at Louisville in 1996. For the Conference Workshop, the participants were divided, after hearing some examples, into groups and each assigned a scene, or sequence of scenes, which presented different types of challenges and opportunities:

the battle from 1 Henry IV (5.3 & 5.4);

the wrestling scene from As You Like It (1.2);

meeting the witches from Macbeth (1.3);

the "Russian" wooing scene from Love's Labor's Lost (5.2).

For the performances, they collaboratively inserted sounds or mimicked the sounds for the Workshop while suggesting additional music, if necessary.

With simple voice effects and imitations, we brought the clang of arms, fire, and popping wine corks into the room.

As mentioned before, this technique is not designed only for Shakespearean plays. It could easily work with any text from any generation as a way to create a fuller effect of interpretation of a script within a classroom. While this may especially help with working through complex lines and language, it can bring life to any student/instructor discussion.

Thanks to the Soundscripting, we explore part of the international language uniting the actual world and the human imagination. It is flexible enough to be done at no cost or with all the advantages of modern media. The text also goes from a one dimensional page, to a two dimensional voice, to our three dimensional performance, to a fourth dimension of nuance, thunder, and music.